DISARMING THE IRISH — REFLECTIONS ON IRISH BODY IMAGE

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> The countryside is tainted by slowly withering blossoms like me. At the creamery in the mornings I see them with black overcoats and unwashed faces, many of them smelling of the very milk which they have come to deliver, except that, like themselves, the milk has gone sour. They have missed out in the game of love.
>
> John B. Keane

The apparent reluctance of the Irish villager to court and marry, and his inclination to marry late and intermarry with cousins, if and when he marries at all, has fascinated social scientists for a generation (see Connell 1962, 1968; Walsh 1970; Kennedy 1975; Messenger 1969). Many levels of explanation have been offered: historical, socio-cultural and psychological.

Economic historians and demographers (Connell 1962, 1968; Kennedy 1975) have singled out the years and traumatic experience of the Great Famine (1845-1849) as the turning point in the trend to later and fewer marriages. They suggest that celibacy be seen as a socially adaptive response to control the once excessively high rural birth rate.

Socio-cultural explanations have concentrated upon the unique patterns of land tenure and inheritance in Ireland (Arensberg 1937) whereby only one son stands to inherit the farm and the privilege of marrying. Psychological analyses suggest that the "basic personality structure" of the Irish male pivots around feelings of masculine inadequacy, ambivalent hostility and dependency feelings towards women originating in strong mother-son Oedipal conflicts (Opler and Singer 1956). John Messenger (1969) emphasizes the role of Irish Catholicism—a tradition steeped in sexual repression, mistrust of the flesh, and the glorification of the ascetic virtues of temperance, continence, and self-mortification.

Within Ireland itself so very much has been written in recent decades about the puritanical nature of Irish Catholicism and its eroding effect upon rural marriage and the freedom of sexual expression (see O'Brien 1954; O'Faolain 1949; Sheehy 1968; Fennell 1974; Rohan 1969) that here I will add only my scattered observations on the ways in which Irish body image unconsciously reflects and reinforces sexual repression.

These observations are based on a year of field work (1974-1975) in "Ballybran," a mountainy parish of long living, mostly celibate shepherds, publicans and fishermen in the Irish-speaking Gaeltacht of West Kerry.[1]

THE CELIBATE IDEAL

According to Irish folk belief, there are two ways of achieving certain salvation. The first is through a red martyrdom, or dying for one's faith in the tradition of the early Christians and the great missionary saints. The second path to sainthood, and the one chosen by most ordinary people, is the white martyrdom (ban-martra), a slow "death to self" through acts of self-denial — fasting, penance — and, above all, a life characterized by sexual purity. The lives of numerous "little saints" such as the Black St. Martin and St. Teresa the Little Flower are held up to villagers as models. However, no one illustrates better the virtues of Irish asceticism and scorn for the body than the modern day Catholic hero, Mat Talbot, a reformed alcoholic and laborer who died in 1925. The Irish clergy have succeeded in bringing Talbot's case to the attention of Rome and he is presently being considered for canonization. Mat's main attribute is that following a youthful period of drinking and dissipation, he converted to a life of rigorous and unremitting penance. According to his biographer, Albert Dolan, Talbot's normal day consisted of equal parts of prayer and work, followed by three hours of sleep and a single scanty meal. When Mat finally dropped dead on a Dublin street, heavy chains were found wrapped around his body and legs underneath his clothing, presumably to prevent any temptation to sexual sin. Father Dolan said of him, "There was packed into Mat Talbot everything that is best in Irish character" (cited by Blanshard 1953:176).

Because of its celibate tradition the Irish Church has been accused of being anti-life, bitter, gloomy, and sexist. Several years ago, Oliver Gogarty protested to the Irish Senate that "it is high time the people of this country found some other way of loving God other than by hating women" (cited by Sheehy 1968:203). As late as the 1940s and 1950s, the "peasant priests" of Maynooth seminary were trained in a moral theology so repressive that the sacrament of marriage was seen as an occasion of sin which necessitated constant supervision on the part of Mother Church. The affectionately termed "penny catachism" upon which most Ballybran villagers were raised teaches that celibacy is the highest status in life, and that the married state is a problematic union of two concupiscent natures.

Sexual intercourse in marriage is lawful but only when indulged in modestly and for the purposes of procreation. The sexual sins of marriage include intercourse for pleasure alone (or "lust" as the Irish clergy refer to it), deviations from the approved coital position, and contraception. Irish women are explicitly prohibited from cooperating in sexual intercourse if the husband uses a condom. The clergy counsels such women to resist their husbands as "a virgin threatened with rape." The only approved form of birth control in rural Ireland is abstinence from sex, and a number of distraught village parents who have reached their desired limit of three or four children have reverted to what rural Church sanctions

as a "brother-sister" marriage — a celibate (or, in the vernacular, a "dry") union.

Until recently, sexual intercourse was forbidden on the eve of the reception of the Holy Eucharist and on Holy Days of Obligation. The rural clergy, armed with the power to forgive the retain sins, as well as with the authority to withhold Holy Communion at the altar rail as a sign of public censure, maintains a firm control over the bodies as well as the souls of their notoriously obedient parishioners.

Such restrictions on sexual expression have been found to be implicated in a number of prevalent social problems in the Irish Republic, among them: alcoholism ("the good man's vice," see Bales 1962); marital desertion and wife beating (O'Higgins 1974); hypochondria, depression and masochism (Messenger 1969:107); schizophrenic episodes (Scheper-Hughes 1978); and, widespread female ignorance of orgasm (Rohan 1969:67-70).

In Ballybran the celibate ethic has contributed to the construction of village institutions and to a pervasive spirit of anomie and demoralization which I discuss elsewhere (Scheper-Hughes 1978). Suffice it to say here that the predominant household in the parish today is based on blood rather than marriage ties. Of 138 households, 63 are comprised of various combinations of consanguinal kin: solitary bachelors, unmarried brothers with spinster sisters, widows and widowers alone or with their unmarried adult children (Table 1). The last parish marriage took place in 1972.

Although the newly ordained post-Vatican II clergy have attempted to correct the Augustinian excesses of past ideology (in the interests of preserving their dwindling flocks), most adult villagers, permeated with years of prior indoctrination, still tend to view sex as dirty and shameful, and still refer modestly to the "decent" and "indecent" parts of the body. When Father Leary reinstituted the tradition of Sunday

> The sight of that medley of wet nakedness chilled him to the bone. Their bodies corpsewhite . . . gleamed with the wet of the sea . . . . It was a swordlike pain to see the signs of adolescence which made repellent their pitiable nakedness.
>
> James Joyce
> Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

night dances for parish youth (after years of their suppression by his predecessors), village parents insisted upon the curate's presence as a chaperon and limited the dancing to daylight hours. Some parents were alarmed to learn that the priest had approved slow, close dancing between the couples as well as traditional Irish step dancing with its minimum of, and highly formalized, body contact. In response to a village school teacher who protested the slow dancing as "sinful" the good priest retorted that the problem with village youth was not too much caressing

TABLE 1

DOMESTIC CYCLES IN BALLYBRAN HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION

STAGES (Total n=138 households)	CLASSES		PERCENTAGES
I. Simple conjugal groups; Non-generative or post-generative (21)	A. Husband-wife childless (by preference or sterility)	(11)	A. 8.0
	B. Husband-wife childless (by emigration of all children)	(10)	B. 7.2
			Total 15.2
II. Fully conjugal and generative; parents and young or still marriageable children (41)	A. Nuclear households	(20)	A. 14.5
	B. Extended households	(21)	B. 15.2
			Total 29.7
III. Transitional households: conjugal-generative becoming non-conjugal, non-generative (13)	A. Husband-wife-middle-aged bachelor son(s)	(11)	A. 8.0
	B. Husband-wife-middle-aged spinster daughter	(2)	B. 1.4
			Total 9.4
IV. Non-conjugal or post-conjugal and non-generative: consanguinial domestic groups (63)	A. Solitary bachelor	(16)	A. 11.6
	B. Bachelor brothers	(7)	B. 5.1
	C. Adult brothers-sisters	(12)	C. 8.7
	D. Widow-middle-aged son	(9)	D. 6.5
	E. Widower-middle-aged son	(8)	E. 5.9
	F. Widower-middle aged daughter	(1)	F. .7
	G. Widower-aged mother	(1)	G. .7
	H. Widow alone	(9)	H. 6.5
			Total 45.7

between the sexes but too little. Parental resistance was also strong with regard to sex education for their adolescent children. At a parish meeting on the topic headed by a representative of the Catholic Marriage Advisory Council, several parents expressed their fear that frank discussions of sexuality might awaken the dormant "appetites" of their naive adolescents. As one mother put it, "'Tis better to let sleeping dogs lie."

That adult attitudes towards the "wicked flesh" have already been transmitted to the younger generations was demonstrated through a Values Hierarchy Scale (Table 2) which I administered to 67 primary and secondary school children. The students were asked to rank order the following values from most to least important: knowledge, career success, health, honor, economic security, freedom, friendship, respect, character, love, religious faith, good disposition, humor, wealth and power.[2] The reactions of the youth to the test itself were revealing: they protested that certain of the values were either irrelevant or repetitious (Didn't respect include a notion of honor? Wasn't good disposition the same as humor?) while other very essential values were left out, among them self-discipline and happy death. In the subsequently modified test, self-discipline occupied a middle rank in the students' evaluations. "Mind the body and you will lose the soul," cautioned one adolescent.

FEAR OF INTIMACY

An Irish psychiatrist and director of a district mental hospital in County Cork summed up the basic psychological problems he encountered in his clinical practice as follows:

> Emotions which seem to me, and indeed to others, to cause particular problems to many persons . . . in this region are greed, envy, bitterness, frustration (sexual and otherwise), guilt, hatred, anger, a general feeling of lack of love, a fear of loss indeed a very high expectancy of and resignation to loss, with consequent fear and avoidance of tenderness and intimacy (Dunne 1970:23).

Certainly, both a fear of and longing after intimacy was a central theme on the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT)[3] responses of village adolescents of both sexes (22 girls and 14 boys). Communication failures, or simply absence of communication between family members, appear to be largely responsible for the themes of personal alienation, loss, and isolation which permeated the TAT stories. In the farm scene of card 2, for example, half the village boys tested, and a third of the girls told stories in which one or more of the characters feels isolated from or scapegoated by the rest of the family. In general the story characters tended to be walled off, locked within themselves: sulking, hurting, longing, crying internally, while externally expressing nothing. In response to card 3BM (figure huddled on floor), young Peter says, "The boy feels so hurt and angry he wants to cry" (but he doesn't); and

TABLE 2

VALUES HIERARCHY SCALE

A. Ballybran National School (6th Form), ages 10-12 years

Rank Order	Boys (10)	Girls (11)
1	Religious faith	Religious faith
2	Health	Health
3	Friendship	Respect
4	Respect	Happy death
5	Freedom	Friendship
6	Love	Love
7	Economic security	Knowledge
8	Self-discipline	Economic security
9	Happy death	Self-discipline
10	Career success	Freedom
11	Power	Humor
12	Knowledge	Power
13	Wealth	Wealth
14	Humor	Career Success

B. Ballybran Secondary School (4th and 5th year classes), ages 15-19

Rank Order	Boys (12)	Girls (31)
1	Health	Health
2	Freedom	Religious faith
3	Friendship	Love
4	Love	Friendship
5	Religious faith	Freedom
6	Respect	Respect
7	Career success	Humor
8	Self-discipline	Self-discipline
9	Happy death	Happy death
10	Economic security	Career success
11	Humor	Knowledge-learning
12	Knowledge-learning	Economic security
13	Wealth	Wealth
14	Power	Power

Grainne, a seriously depressed 18-year-old from an isolated mountain farm, says:

> This poor creature, she have nobody to talk to. She wants to tell her problems to somebody, but she can't. (Why can't she?) She's the type that keeps to herself.

In those TAT cards particularly evocative of dynamic family interactions it was characteristic of the Irish response style to tell a good deal about what the characters were thinking and somewhat less of what they were feeling, but to create little dialogue between the figures, even when the card clearly suggests conversation. Frequently, one or more characters was described as "a silent type," "the kind that doesn't say much," "a dreamer," "lost in thought," "in a world of her own," or as lifeless statues or paintings.

In actual village society, a lack of communication is not only characteristic of the parent-child dyad, but of relationships between adult peers: friends, neighbors, men and women, husbands and wives. Long-standing feuds between villagers no longer erupt into the famous "faction fights" of the past (see Fox 1962); rather, anger and disapproval are expressed in silence — "not giving them the time of day." A village artisan and raconteur articulated village etiquette to me on one occasion. Noteworthy is the wariness of human nature and lack of what Erik Erikson might call "basic trust";

> I do find that in Ballybran there's more of a general conversation between people. If you or I went to Tom's [the pub] we couldn't just chat it up, you and I. No, not at all. Because if I say something to you and you say something to me, well the other man will think we have a secret and he'll want to hear it too. So, he'll come over to us and say, "hello, dearies, give me a fag, and how's the races?" To my own ideas, it does great harm, great harm, indeed, to become too intimate with a person. When people become too intimate, they have too much knowledge of each other, and that is very detrimental. You confide in them, and they "soft" it out, and "soft" it out, and you say this and that, and later on you live to regret it.

In a similar vein a well-liked villager once told me his formula for successful human relationships: "Be courteous to all, have few friends, and trust no one." In such an emotional climate it is little wonder that attempts at courtship and romantic love so often end in stalemate.

"INNER AND OUTER SPACES" — REFLECTIONS ON IRISH BODY IMAGE

Mary Douglas has suggested (1966, 1970) that all societies might be classified along what she called "group-grid" lines according to body symbolization and concern with ritual pollution. She would see the body as a natural and primary symbol for the social order such that peoples' attitudes towards the governing of their bodies would reflect their ideas about the ways in which social relations (especially between the sexes) should be ordered. Certainly, the rural Irish share with Orthodox Jews, Hindus, and the Yurok Indians of California, among others, a rather strong preoccupation with matters of ritual and sexual purity, which is often expressed through a rigid vigilance over bodily boundaries. Ballybran villagers, for example, evidenced a high degree of anxiety over both what goes in and what comes out of the body. Ambivalence towards "giving out" or "letting go" was reflected in women's beliefs that breast feeding is "too draining" an experience, in men's fears of wasting semen, in older villagers' attitudes towards guarding gossip and secrets ("I have a prayer," confided old Maggie, "and nobody else have it, and if you think you can get it from me, just see if I don't die with me lips sealed").

The "giving out" of sins in confession was particularly anxiety-provoking for many villagers, and their scrupulosity was expressed in an agonizing regard for the proper religious fulfillment of the sacrament: had they confessed the exact number of omissions and commissions? were there any extenuating circumstances that might increase or mitigate blame? had they recited their penance adequately? shouldn't they perhaps repeat it, just to be sure? One elderly villager expressed her state of confusion, impatience, and ambivalence about the sacrament as we were standing together on a particularly slow moving confessional line. She volunteered, "Yerra, we do make mountains out of nothing. And I think we do be wasting the priest's time in the box. But we never know for sure what is a sin, and so we do confess it all."

A kind of ornery retentiveness was suspected of sick children who did not respond well to medication — they were said to be "holding in" the bug, fever, or infection. One distraught village mother asked me to have a look at her three-year-old who she was sure might succumb to a severe strain of the measles that was spreading through the village during the spring of our stay. The child had a high fever but not a sign of the characteristic rash. "That's just the trouble," said the mother, "the girl is too stubborn to put out the spots and be done with it." Similar sentiments were expressed about cancer: the bad kind, said villagers, was not the visible growths, but rather the kind people held inside them, the dreaded "inwardly disease" referred to so frequently in the Ballybran death register.

The concern with bodily exits, entrances, and boundaries, and the fear of violation and penetration extend as well to those convenient symbols of the body — the home with its doors, gates, fences and (in Ireland) stone boundaries (see Bachelard 1969; Jung 1964). The same Irish defensiveness and guardedness is projected into the numerous

allusions in Irish folklore to the proper way to enter or leave a home, the magical marking of the four corners of a new house site, and in the protective precaution of a St. Briget's cross over every door lintel. Before going to bed at night, the old grandmother blesses each of the four bed posts and asks that a holy sentinel stand guard at each one:

> Matthew, Mark, Luke and John
> Bless the bed that I lie on.
> One to guide me, one to guard me,
> And two to carry my soul to heaven.

In "smooring" the fire for the night it is customary to pray:

> I save this fire as noble Christ saves.
> Mary on the top of the house
> Brigit in its center
> The eight strongest angels in heaven
> Preserving this home and keeping its people safe.

In terms of Irish body image, folk beliefs about the soul reveal Irish anxieties about penetration, loss, retentiveness, and vigilance. The soul, traditionally believed to be a slippery bit of muscle located under the arm in the form of a fish (hence called _iasc ne beath_, the fish of life), is not to be entirely trusted. According to folklore from the neighboring Blasket Islands (and still recited by older parishioners of Ballybran), the soul can escape from the body in the form of a butterfly should the unwary person fall asleep with his mouth open. Similarly, mothers are relieved when the vulnerable fontanel (_loigir an bhaitlhis_) closes in their infants — another port of exit for the wily soul. Current wake rituals are oriented around the precaution that friends and kin sit with the body for a few days to be sure that the unpredictable soul has left the body. As one young farmer explained, "we don't like to bring the body into church while it's still 'fresh-like.' You'd want to be good and sure the soul isn't still hovering about."

Finally, I am reminded of the tradition in west Kerry of annually checking the heavy stone boundaries that separate one small, rocky field from the next in order to be certain of no "tinkering" on the part of a mischievous neighbor — a common source, I might add, of paranoid delusion among schizophrenic patients in Kerry. A violation of the land (symbolic of family integrity and pride) is tantamount to a violation of the body.

On the other hand, villagers are equally guarded about both what they take into the body (as in sex and food) as well as about being "taken in" (as with "codding," flattery or blarney). Hence, one finds a receptivity to fasting and abstinence, a concern with eating only "plain and simple" food, and a preference for liquids over solids. Many village women rejected tampons as "dirty things," and the few women who would discuss it thought that protective sheaths and condoms (i.e., sex-once-removed) would be preferable to either intrusive diaphragms or the pill.

There is a tendency among country people to use clothing defensively as well. Adult villagers demonstrated the characteristic Irish "scorn for the body" in wearing the same wollen sweaters, heavy boots and pants or skirts both indoors and out, in summer and in winter, in wet weather and in dry. The clothing tended to be layered, long and loose, both concealing and protecting the body. Long black shawls wrapped across part of the face served as a disguise for older women, and waistcoat and sweaters, often pulled tightly across the chest in a defensive gesture, served as armor. Legs crossed, arms folded, head slightly bowed, the typical Ballybran pub stance is a posture of caution and guardedness. The countryman (and woman) is equally reserved and dignified in his walk and, when working in the field, he anchors his feet with his legs stiffly and firmly together. He makes no idle or random gestures with his hands while talking, and a subtle snap of the neck or a raised index finger is his greeting. In all, the body image of the Kerryman is a study in control, understatement, and tenseness.

The traditional Irish reticence regarding the reception of Holy Communion also fits into the general pattern I am describing. Even many years after the late Pope John relaxed fasting and confessional regulations prior to communion, older villagers will not take anything into their mouth after midnight on the eve of receiving the Blessed Sacrament, nor will the majority receive without prior confession of their faults. The public act of receiving the wafer on the tongue is embarrassing for some, and criticism is reserved for those who "snap up the host" too quickly or those who extend their tongue too far or too early. The "improper" reception of the Eucharist is a common element in folk narrative. In the numerous communion motifs which I collected in the village as well as those courtesy of Professor Sean O'Suilleabhain of the Irish Folklore Commission, the tension between "taking in" and "putting out" is particularly marked. Two tales will serve to illustrate this prominent theme: "The Woman Who Could Not Die" and "The Fairy Rider." In the first, a priest encounters a woman over a hundred years old, infirm and suffering terribly, but apparently unable to die. The priest acts as her confessor and the old woman reveals a terrible secret that she had kept back all her life. Once as a child when returning from the altar rail, after receiving Holy Communion, the wafer slipped from her mouth and fell to the floor. Shyness and shame prevented her from bending down to pick it up, so she left it there and went back to her pew. She carried this grave sacrilege unconfessed all her lifetime and had finally come to realize that her punishment was a curse that she would never die until the Sacred Host was recovered and placed back in the ciborium on the altar or else received properly. The priest, filled with sorrow and compassion at the old woman's tale, gallops to the site of the church which has since been destroyed, and finds a beautiful bush flowering among the ruins. He finds the Sacred Host at the roots of the bush and he carefully carries it to the ancient woman who receives it as Holy Viaticum (communion at death) at which point her tortured soul is released from captivity in the decrepit body and flies up to eternity.

The second tale is of an old woman who dies and is waked but who is visited every night by a mysterious horse and rider who commands her to

sit up in her wake bed. The people are terrified and run away to find a priest, who reluctantly agrees to sit watch on the third night and confront the horse and rider. The rider appears and explains to the priest that the old woman had taken Holy Communion with an unconfessed mortal sin on her soul, and hence the devil was coming to claim her soul. The priest commands the dead woman to sit up and surrender the Host which had been received unworthily. The woman obediently complies, and once the priest has the wafer in his consecrated fingers he announces loudly, "Be gone, Satan. Now that I have her soul safely, you can have her worthless body" (field notes, November 1974). This message is reinforced at Sunday Mass where one missionary, a frequent visitor to the parish, would remind the congregation immediately after the communion ceremony, "whosoever received unworthily, he is guilty of the body and blood of Christ."

If I am correct in my speculation, these oppositional themes of flesh/sprit, purity/pollution, guilt/shame, taking in/giving out, so basic to rural Irish personality modalities, and expressed through body imagery and folklore, inhibit the expression of physical sexuality and make celibacy a more comfortable and less conflictive way of life for the great number. Some years ago the Irish Catholic Church called for a national movement of "moral rearmament" to combat the twin evils of materialism and secularization. To the social critic, even more serious, perhaps, are the twin evils of sexual devitalization and cultural demoralization, and these might be countered through a call for "physical disarmament" — a surrender of those heavily guarded body boundaries of the fears of penetration, loss, giving up and taking in that are so preventative of the expression of intimacy and conjugal love in rural Ireland.

NOTES

[1]This paper is based on a section of chapter four in my forthcoming book, Saints, Scholars and Schizophrenics; Mental Illness in Rural Ireland. University of California Press (scheduled for publication, summer 1978).

[2]The Values Hierarchy Scale was first developed by Diaz-Guerrero (1963) for the purpose of investigating value differences between Mexican and American youth.

[3]The Thematic Apperception Test consists of a series of standardized pictures which reflect everyday characters in a variety of moods and human situations. The subject is asked to make up a story for each picture with a definite plot and a final outcome. He is encouraged to tell what each character is thinking and feeling.

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